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### A Critical Discourse Analysis of Representation of Asian Indian Folk Tales in US-American Children's Literature

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**Volume 10 Issue 2 (June 2008) Article 3**

**Sudeshna Roy,**

**"A Critical Discourse Analysis of Representation of Asian Indian Folk Tales in US-American Children's Literature"**

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**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 10.2 (2008)**

**Thematic Issue *Racialized Narratives for Children***

**Edited by C. Richard King and John Streamas**

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**Abstract:** In her article "A Critical Discourse Analysis of Representation of Asian Indian Folk Tales in US-American Children's Literature," Sudeshna Roy explores the representation of India in U.S. children's picture books by interpreting prevailing images of the subcontinent and its peoples and their impact on children's understandings. Roy analyzes three key elements -- titles, illustrations, and text -- identifying a set of predominant themes: nature and wild animals, poverty and hardship, spiritual hermits, and wit and common sense wisdom. From these findings, Roy suggests that Eurocentric imperial ideologies continue to inform the formulation of race, gender, and nation in U.S. children's books. Indeed, the books analyzed maintain popular expectations about India, dictated by colonial stereotypes, the discomfort in approaching multiculturalism in the United States, and the concept of the "other" socially, temporally, and spatially removed from the "here and now." The discourses in these books thus affirm the view of a one-way history of progress, development, and modernity of Western society in their negative mirror images, stagnation, underdevelopment, and tradition in the "other" world, in this case, India.

## **Sudeshna ROY**

### **A Critical Discourse Analysis of Representation of Asian Indian Folk Tales in US-American Children's Literature**

Thomas Moore and Louise Derman-Sparks found that as children begin to understand the difference between "here" and "other places," they start to understand differences of all kinds. With globalization, it has become especially important for children to learn about other people, places, and ways of doing things. The importance of books as agents in the processes of socialization of the young has been established standard (see, e.g., Betzner and Moore; Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, Ross). When a child reads about other children in a different land and context, he/she gets the opportunity to explore a part of that culture. The United States is considered to be multicultural with a few victories in challenging the cultural mechanisms through which the white, European-descended authority wield power, for example affirmative action in education, etc. However, what has also re-arisen and entrenched itself in the US-American consciousness is, in the words of Peter Schwarz, the pre-Civil Rights "separate but equal" mentality or a cultural/social segregation. For the children of the new millennium in the U.S., there is thus a need to recognize the diversity of cultures and languages that exist all around them.

For the study at hand, children's picture books were identified from the anthology compiled by Carolyn W. Lima and John A. Lima in the section "Foreign Lands: India" and then selected from the holdings of the Pullman, Washington public library I conducted my research in. The text and illustrations from 13 books I selected have been analysed using critical discourse analysis. Norman Fairclough explains that critical discourse analysis begins with a view of language as a social practice. In a sense, it is a historically and socially placed practice, both in itself socially shaped and in turn, socially shaping in nature, what Fairclough explains as being constitutive in nature (32). According to Fairclough, language is constitutive of three elements: social identities, social relations, and systems of knowledge and belief. Critical discourse analysis explores how discursive practices, events and texts arise from, and are ideologically shared by relations of power and struggles over power. It explores relationships between discourse and society. In this paper, then, I am trying to explore whether there is an underlying Euroamerican ideology at play in texts and illustrations appearing in U.S. children's literature about India. Since these books were chosen from a public library, these books, in what they represent have the potential to become a picture of India that the children of this U.S. town are initialized to. If these children do not have a connection or acquaintance with people from India or if their family members do not get the opportunity to visit India in the near future, these books might be the only way of introducing aspects about India to a child's imagination for a long time to come. Therefore, it is critical to understand the importance of the results of the analysis of these books in light of the knowledge that these books have the power to shape and influence thoughts and behavior of individuals pertaining to India and Indians in the future through what they are communicating now. In my study, I explore the representation of the local environment and people of one such country, India, in selected children's picture books in the U.S. based on a selection available in a public library. The question that is relevant in this case is what picture of India is becoming accessible to US-American children as they are growing up? How does this picture shape the child's perception about India and Indian people?

Terrell A. Young explains that the niche of folk tales in particular is very popular with publishers. Indeed, many scholars today feel that folk literature, the collected and transcribed oral tales of people, may be one of the ingredients necessary for children to find reading books a delightful experience (see, e.g., Bosma; Goforth and Spillman; Young). Frances S. Goforth and Carolyn V. Spillman found that based on readers' emotional and intellectual development, their experience of folk literature made

them "find new worlds grounded in fantasy but still reflecting realistic human conditions" (6). They also found that interests in other cultures is developed through the use of folk literature. It is therefore necessary to understand what kind of folk literature is available in a particular country, in this case India, from which publishers and authors in U.S. choose and adapt. In India, there are three sets of tales, the *Panchatantra*, the *Hitopadesa*, and the *Jataka* written in classical Sanskrit that are even today continuing to attract the attention of storytellers in the U.S. (see Lalvani).

In considering how children's books can reflect the culture of a society, Michael W. Apple and Linda K. Christian-Smith reiterate that books are cultural artifacts that are "important vehicles for ideas" (5). Arlene Hirschfelder, Paulette F. Molins, and Yvonne Wakim add that children's books, specifically, are not merely frivolous "entertainment," they are part of a society's general culture. The kind of children's books that are out there does not necessarily reflect the totality of choices of the U.S. society but, rather, it indicates a cultural environment that is both constructed by ideologies, and in turn, construct identities. The process ends up in perpetuating or grooming a particular image of races, ethnicities, or facts about foreign countries. Although there seems to be cultural shifts that children's literature in the U.S. might be undergoing or may further undergo in the future, Lata Mani observes in her study that this effort generates from the desire to have an analysis of cultures adequate to respond to a "new" global cultural economy in the country. The intent is to "provide a location where the new politics of difference -- racial, sexual, cultural, transnational -- can combine and be articulated in all their dazzling plurality" (Mani 392). However, Mani argues, such an analysis has the tendency to "leave in place Western ethnocentrism and white-centeredness, the very edifices it supposedly challenges" (392). Radhika Parameswaran, too, finds that there are issues of representational politics in narratives and discourses that have global audience, that is, children's books that represent other countries do have global audience. She explains that postcolonial approaches to race, nation, and cultural representation in these discourses reveal that they are all anchored to the troubled historical discourses of Euroamerican colonial modernity. The lands and people "out there" are inevitably "othered" in order to produce and sustain an idea fundamental to colonial discourse: that the Western model is the norm by which other countries and peoples are to be judged. Thus, children's books, conceived to create an initial picture of another country in the minds of children, function as carriers of Western ethnocentrism instead.

Suren Lalvani explains that with the word "India," comes to mind the visualization of the spiritual, the fatalistic, the collective, the head-dresses, the turbans, the fabrics, and the elephants. He finds that these ideas are incomplete and fragmented because of the lack of the original context in which these concepts were located. Lalvani clarifies that this is a way in which the Western self contains the perceived threat posed by the previously colonized nations and reinvents themselves through such a consumption of the non-Western "other." Edward Said explains how the West has used "tradition" strategically as an operating concept in "essentializing" identities of or from Asia and the "Orient." It is an invidious, arbitrary identity assignment, as a way of the West looking at the East where the East is assigned the role of authenticating itself to the West. The process of "othering" happens through various means. Stuart Hall argues that "Discourses are ways of talking, thinking or representing a particular subject or topic. They produce meaningful knowledge about that subject. This knowledge influences social practices, and so has real consequences and effects. Discourses ... always operate in relation to power -- they are part of the way power circulates and is contested" (295). Power relations have traditionally been in favor of Western societies as opposed to the societies that were all different from the "West" -- in other words, the "Rest." It is essential to understand that India too has been a part of this category, the "Rest," given its 200-year long history of subjugation by the British, the "West." Further, Kenneth M. Zeichner suggests that US-Americans tend to be predominantly monocultural and monolingual. They are educated in a specific social and political climate without sufficient opportunities to explore matters of diversity and multiculturalism and J. Kurtz evokes the

imagery of cultures meeting with "grating, scraping sounds of two unlike substances rubbing against each other" (9; this imagery originates from Kurtz's efforts to negotiate some of the difficulties in writing multicultural children's books in the U.S.). Clearly, the concept of multiculturalism needs to settle in well before it is incorporated in its true spirit in children's literature and Henry Giroux, for example, postulates that U.S. educators more often than not embrace a distaste for the many diverse cultures that are presently to be found in the U.S. and that they promote fiercely cultural uniformity instead. This attitude continues today in post-9/11 U.S. society, one that has become even more distrustful of "other" cultures. In consequence, children growing up under these circumstances are getting a skewed representation of other world cultures.

In trying to pinpoint the perception of "India" carried by the U.S. adult population Penelope J. Oakes, S.A. Haslam, and John C. Turner write about particularization of certain images and the categorization of images into very old notions about India, as "primarily, an information-reduction mechanism, designed to help the perceiver cope with limited information processing capacity. Its outcome is a distortion of perception, an overgeneralization and exaggeration of individuals' true characteristics" (104). On the basis of such categorization, groups are formed in the minds of the perceiver and information about similarities and differences within this group then becomes accessible at varying levels of extraction. On the one hand, it may be argued that the logic of not introducing complex societies like modern India, and instead sticking to the age-old folk tales based on history and ancient stories, is perhaps an information-reduction exercise by the parents in order to make it easy for their children to understand the concept of this country called "India." On the other hand, the overgeneralizations that could be drawn from folk tales, definitely increase the danger of painting a distorted picture of modern-day India. Speaking from her experience as a children's book publisher and writer in India, Sandhya Rao laments that Western publishers often decline to publish books that do not have illustrations that meet "their" vision of "India." When approaching children's literature in the U.S., this factor may provide for some amount of exoticism and can give us already drawn boundaries and subject expectations of writers and readers alike whenever they think about tales from India. Said explains the phenomenon of Orientalism which in turn can throw light on perceptions about India. He claims that Orientalism helped define Europe's self-image and that it had less to do with the Orient and more to do with "our" world. The construction of identity in every age and every society, Said maintains, involves establishing opposites and "others." This gives the West a sense of its own cultural and intellectual superiority. Unfortunately, this phenomenon also subverts the need of every Asian Indian child in the United States to see a realistic representation of the country of his/her origin.

It is important to note at this point that it is through an artist's eyes that children are able to get a glimpse of the natural settings of a foreign land or country. Bette Bosma contends that the artist's conception of the geographic locale of a story transmits the universalities or differences among the cultures, as well as a sense of history. These illustrations are not only meant to entertain the child but it serves as a way of unlocking the child's imagination about the country in question. Ellen H. Spitz notes that the importance of craft and workmanship deserves emphasis. Since contemporary picture books deal didactically and often superficially with difficult real-life situations, it is even more important to stress subtleties of artfulness in order to make a lasting impression on the child's mind. However, to depict a picture that is representative of historical facts and a realistic portrayal of the natural and traditional aspects of the country, one would need to look beyond popular expectations about that country.

As stated above, I have analysed the selected 13 books in three areas: the titles, the illustrations, and the text in the books. Right at the outset, what is very interesting is that almost all of the 13 books were published in the 1990s except for two, one of which was published in 1961 (Brown, *Once a Mouse*) and one which was originally published before 1935 (Kipling, *Rikki Tikki Tavi*). The timeline of the books is of particular significance because during this decade India was undergoing irreversible

changes in its society, politics, economy, education, and other important areas. The primary categories that emerged during the analysis were the books' contents about nature and wild animals, poverty and hardship, spiritual hermits, and wit and common sense wisdom. The theme of nature and wild animals runs across all the books. I analyzed the two parts -- "nature" and "wild animals" -- separately but within the same category. In almost every title, every illustration and narration, there is some allusion to nature. In some books such as *In the Heart of the Village* (Bash) and *Rikki Tikki Tavi* (Kipling) it has been projected in a very domestic, mild manner while in the others (with the exception of *Count Your Way through India* [Haskins]) a very dense, forested picture of nature has been painted. In some there is the relentless sun beating down on people and animals alike (Hodges, *Hidden in Sand*), while in others there are insurmountable mountains (Newton, *The Stonecutter*) or hostile jungles and surroundings (Souhami, *No Dinner: The Very Hungry Lion*; Galdone, *The Monkey and the Crocodile*). In *The Monkey Bridge* (Martin), nature appears to be distant but ever present like a tangible part of one's very existence. Even when a town is portrayed, like in *The Sanyasin's First Day* (Shank) where a small town of Kerala (a state in South India) is depicted, the first and last page has pictures of dense forests. It is as if nature pervades every aspect of life in India. The desert is also portrayed in *Hidden in Sand* (Hodges) as a pitiless part of life that people have to deal with everyday in their lives. The entire story of *Once a Mouse* (Brown) is played out in the forest. With practically no hint of a country that has rich architecture -- although in *Count Your Way through India* (Haskins) there is a picture of the Taj Mahal -- brick houses, modern buildings and even skyscrapers, the reader is led to believe that people live in very close proximity with nature. The imagery that comes to mind is that of a people who are so backward that they are still living at the mercy of nature. Living in the groomed, organized natural settings of the U.S., the presence of nature the way it has been depicted in these books does evoke a different picture of a land far away, of a people who are far from civilization as they know it, of a place quite uninhabitable from their perspective. Hall saw this as a way of conflating fact and fantasy in order to constitute knowledge about the "other." In this case, living close to nature practically implies that the Indians have no developed culture -- and are therefore "uncivilized." Some of the illustration reminded me of the claustrophobic feeling I had experienced as a youngster when I had read Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* and his descriptions of nature in Africa. The very essence of a life lived as if in the stone age, surrounded by thick foliage, infested with insects, wild animals running about aplenty, serves the purpose of perpetuating a negative stereotype about the country. The most commonly used animal imageries are those of tigers, elephants, snakes, monkeys, cows, and jackals. The animals are almost always lurking in the background, terrifying people and posing a menace in most occasions (Wolf, *The Very Hungry Lion*; Gleeson, *The Tiger and the Brahmin*). In some cases, the animals are enacting power play through wit and wisdom. Poverty and hardship are also very prominent in the books analyzed. The thread of poverty and want touches almost all the tales (except Easwaran, *The Monkey and the Mango* and Galdone, *The Monkey and the Crocodile*). Story after another story is stuck on this issue. In *The Stonecutter* (Newton), the man polishes stone after cutting it from the hard mountain; in *No Dinner* (Souhami), the old woman has to go to her granddaughter's house to eat something to put on some weight; in *The Sanyasin's First Day* (Shank), the sanyasin waits for someone to show some kindness in order for him to eat; and in *Hidden in Sand* (Hodges), the people have to cross the desert for trade or else die in starvation.

The text of the stories appearing on the first page of the books and sometimes in the first lines, are striking in their depiction of poverty: "Once there was a poor stonecutter who lived in a small hut in the forest on the side of the mountain" (Newton, *The Stonecutter* 2); "In a faraway country, said the teller of tales, there once lived a trader who traveled about, buying and selling. ... It happened on his travels from east to west that the trader had to cross a great desert of sand. ... The sea of sand swallowed all tracks, and there was no road to follow. The going was hard" (Hodges, *Hidden in Sand*



2); "There was once an old woman who lived at the edge of a big forest with her little dog. She was so bent and frail that she was nothing but skin and bone" (Souhami, *No Dinner* 2); "It was the sanyasin's first day. ... He had given away everything he owned to lead the holy life of a sayasin, to do nothing but pray, and walk from town to town dressed in orange, begging for just enough rice to fill his bowl. ... 'Oh, please,' he prayed, 'let someone put rice in my bowl to give me something to eat'" (Shank, *The Sanyasin's First Day* 2-4). Words like "poor," "thin," "simple," "begging," are used repeatedly resulting in an image of poverty and deprivation. The issue of poverty and starvation paints a picture of an India with very little economic prosperity. Instead of hardship being portrayed as a positive trait which leads youngsters to learn the value of hard work and determination, the books depict hardship as a way of life without choices, as something people are forced to do. The illustrations are even more telling. Only two of the 13 analysed have pictures of an automobile (*Count Your Way Through India, The Sanyasin's First Day*); the people are shown to have lined faces and thin, frail structures (*Count Your Way Through India, Hidden in Sand, In the Heart of the Village, No Dinner, Once a Mouse, The Monkey Bridge, The Monkey and the Mango, The Sanyasin's First Day, The Tiger and the Brahmin, The Very Hungry Lion*); the surroundings are mostly bare (*Hidden in Sand, No Dinner, Once a Mouse, The Monkey and the Mango, The Stonecutter, The Tiger and the Brahmin*); people are shown working day in and day out with little time for leisure (*Hidden in Sand, In the Heart of the Village, The Monkey Bridge, The Sanyasin's First Day, The Stonecutter, The Very Hungry Lion*); and no modern amenity is anywhere in view (*Hidden in Sand, In the Heart of the Village, No Dinner, Once a Mouse, Rikki Tikki Tavi, The Monkey Bridge, The Monkey and the Mango, The Stonecutter, The Tiger and the Brahmin, The Very Hungry Lion*). Often, the colors used are either very dull and pale with shades of black and grey extensively used, or, they were bright to the extent of being gaudy and garish symbolizing the exotic, the intriguing. So exaggerated is the discourse of poverty and hardship in these books that it becomes a fantasy of degradation and it appears the poor have been placed strategically in order to glorify the rich lifestyles of the children and other people living in the United States (on this, see Hall 306).

As to motifs, the the picture of the "spiritual hermit" pervades many of the books. Two of the titles clearly indicate this, *The Sanyasin's First Day* (Shank) and *The Tiger and the Brahmin* (Gleeson). The words "sanyasin" and "Brahmin" are depicted to mean spiritual hermits. Although the word "Brahmin" has other class-based connotations in Indian society, in the books analyzed "Brahmins" have been represented as men trying to attain spiritual enlightenment. The story either revolves around the hermit or there is indirect reference to spiritual hermit-like characteristics in people. They are projected as eccentric and otherworldly men who possess a minimum of objects (including clothing, they being Alexander the Great's original "naked philosophers"), are mendicant, and pass their days and nights in ritual worship of their chosen manifestation of deity. The hermits are a bridge to ancient practices, but they are not like any hermit or comparable eremitical tradition of the West. Parameswaran terms such a depiction as being anchored to the amorphous state of extinction and the ephemerality of a culture that cannot be assimilated into modernity – or in other words, frozen in time. By dislocating the phenomenon of the spiritual hermit from its context and symbolizing it as everything Indian, we, once more see the process of exoticizing and "othering" at work here.

Most Indian stories are robust with common sense, wit, and humor. This is perhaps one of the only positive ideas that are generated about Asian Indians in the children's books I analyzed for this study. However, it is important to make the distinction that wit is rarely conducive to wisdom. It is more often perceived as a means of power-play and fortification. In *The Tiger and the Brahmin* (Gleeson), the jackal rescues the Brahmin from the hungry tiger and as a way of thanking the jackal, the Brahmin says "You have taught me a lesson that I never found in my holy books" (29). The implication is that even the Brahmin acknowledges how cunning is better than knowledge from holy scriptures. The text further continues explaining, "As for the Brahmin, he continued studying the holy scriptures and ac-

quiring merit by helping all things great and small. But he lived the rest of his life a much wiser man. As a result of the cleverness of the jackal and the deceit of the tiger, the Brahmin had learned the ways of the world. For in India, all things have a purpose" (Gleeson 31). The Brahmin's stress on common-sense solutions to problems flashes immediately an image of a less-sophisticated people who are trying to use cunning to advance in life. The last statement is also quite telling in its implications. The words "in India, all things have a purpose" is not specifically explained. Instead, the meaning is left loosely hanging. Hall writes that the "other" is the dark side -- "forgotten, repressed and denied; the reverse image of enlightenment and modernity" (Gleeson 314). Under this presumption, the use of wit and wisdom is transformed into cunning in this particular discourse and other such seemingly innocent ones that appear in the books. A sense of "stereotypical dualism" (Hall 307) is infused in these discourses whereby the very thing that could seem to be attractive, intelligent and modern, could also be used to represent the exact opposite: distasteful, cunning, and primitive.

Parameswaran finds in her study that modern media continue to reproduce the hierarchical relations of race, gender, and nation articulated in Euroamerican colonial ideologies. Following the findings of the study at hand, we find a similar trend with modern publishing houses deciding to publish a particular representation of India in U.S. children's books. In the discourse of the Western, expansive, and oppressive societies, India is still identified in its colonial *avatar*. Popular belief about India as expressed in the discourses that appear in U.S. children's literature seems to be oblivious to the new face of the country. It instead holds aloft the stereotypical image of the country as an exotic, different, "other" culture only to be imagined in the realm of the fantastic through translations of its folk literature. Clare Bradford observes that there is very little possibility of perceiving a country after "'the end of empire,' so influential and pervasive are the effects of imperial rule on its former colonies" (216) and that children's books are continuing to rehearse and revisit the events of colonization. I find this to be the case in my study. More than half a century after India's freedom from the Queen's *raj* (rule), Western literary senses about India are still cocooned inside a comforting shell of denial and "soft" supremacy that restricts them from describing the country in its true magnificence.

Although scholars insist on identifying folk tales from foreign cultures as a way of helping young readers to understand the personal dimension and the standards of behavior of a culture, and at the same time reduce stereotypes about that culture, it is difficult to see how this can be achieved by describing a culture only through the genre of folk tales, as is the case with depictions of India. Thomas King articulates writers' responsibilities when he writes that "The job of writers is to hold up prisms (mirrors are overrated) so we can admire ourselves from different angles, colors, and perspectives" (7) thus suggesting that even if a particular genre like folk tale is used to depict another culture, its handling by the writer and the illustrator needs to offer a variety of perspectives just as colors glancing off inside a prism. However, from what I found in the selection of the children's books analysed, colonial politics seems to dictate just which colors are allowed to refract: the bleak ones.

The authors and illustrators of the books analyzed are drawing on folk tales of India and have, literally, created the images that go along with the narratives, and incorporate a timeless character to the tales that is not as positive in nature as they would like us to believe. Timelessness, in these books, appears synonymous with a lack of development and with poverty and exotic elements. The titles, the sketches/images, and the stories of the tales I analyzed for this study show that the timeline of the stories is quite dated and events are unfolding a long, long time ago even if they were mostly written in the 1990s. There are very limited sketches of how people in India live today. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann emphasize that the play of language has the transcendental power to "make present" a variety of objects that are spatially, temporally and socially absent from the "here and now." Despite this powerful aspect of language, the discourses that we came across about India in this selection of children's literature in the United States, always seem to be of "other" men in "another" time. Johannes Fabian explains this phenomenon as discourses that help in creating a one-way



history of progress, development and modernity of the Western society as opposed to their negative mirror images like, stagnation, underdevelopment and traditional in the "other" world, in this case India. These stories are being informed only by India's past and not its present and has no indication of what to expect in the future. What was true about Said's writings in 1978 about "Orientalism" and all things Asian, has not really changed in the close to three decades that have gone by since. The nature of the West in trying to decide and then define what the developing world's authentic nature in its essence is and is not has become evident through this study once again. The desire to "freeze" the "native culture" is but a familiar hierarchical strategy for "othering" India generally considered to be a member of developing nations.

There is a land in the East, called India. It is a magical and mysterious place, and the customs of the people who live there, may seem strange to an outsider. Clearly, the politics of "West and the Rest" continues to play its part, at least in the sample I have analyzed. Fritz Blackwell comments that India does not seem to be holding "the same sort of literary interest for Westerners now as it did in the early and middle twentieth century ... With global travel, global television, and global contact via computers, the old exoticism is gone" (224). Presumably, he is talking about adult literary interests here, because as we have seen through this study, in U.S. children's literature the popular expectations about India seem to be dictated by stereotypes, the discomfort in approaching multiculturalism, and the concept of the "other" who is socially, temporally, and spatially removed. It would require the U.S. society to change its ideological positioning as a superpower in all possible respects in order for it to try to reconfigure its efforts towards an understanding of "other" cultures and to encourage a multicultural society to flourish in all its diversity and splendor. Although the civilization of India goes back several centuries, the people of India are very much on the same ground, in the same time, as other, newer societies of this world. And it is important for children's writers and illustrators of the United States to recognize this modern face of the country in order to represent it honestly, appropriately, and contextually.

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